

## ***FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** December 10, 2015

**Agenda Item:** South Whitefish Range Conservation Easement (Haskill Basin)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final Action

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 minutes

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### **Background**

FWP has been negotiating two conservation easements with F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber Co. in Haskill Basin (3,020 acres) and Trumbull Creek (7,150 acres). The Haskill Basin project received Commission endorsement in November 2013 and the Trumbull Creek project in May 2015. Both properties are located on the southern end of the Whitefish Range between Whitefish and Columbia Falls. Given their similarities of habitat, location, ownership, and management, both proposed conservation easements were analyzed by FWP within the same Environmental Assessment and Decision Notice. However, because the Haskill Basin project is in the latter stages of completion, that project is separated for final Commission action.

The Haskill Basin property provides winter range for mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose and habitat for westslope cutthroat trout and 17 species of conservation concern. The conservation easement would secure approximately 80% of the water supply for the City of Whitefish, conserve important fish and wildlife habitat from expanded development or unsustainable forest management, and would sustain high levels of public recreation. The estimated value (by an appraiser) of the easement is \$20,600,000. Purchase price would be based on a final appraisal. Funding sources are as follows: \$7M from the Forest Legacy Program, \$2M from the Habitat Conservation Plan Land Acquisition Program, \$7.7M from the City of Whitefish, and approximately \$3.9M in donated value by the landowner.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results**

FWP worked with The Trust for Public Land and the City of Whitefish on public scoping in 2014. An EA was released for public comment from October 26 to November 22, 2015 and included a public hearing in Whitefish on November 9<sup>th</sup>. Two legal notices were published in four local newspapers, 161 notices were mailed to neighboring landowners and interested parties, and the EA was posted on the FWP webpage. FWP received 56 public comments from individuals and organizations; 6 as testimony at the public hearing and 50 additional comments submitted in writing or email. Twenty-nine of the comments supported, and none opposed the project. The remaining 27 comments, along with 15 people who expressed support for the project, identified questions, issues or concerns in 12 different categories that are addressed in the Decision Notice.

### **Alternatives and Analysis**

Two alternatives were analyzed and considered in the EA: 1) Proposed Action—purchase the Haskill and Trumbull Creek conservation easements and 2) No Action—do not complete one or both proposed conservation easements. Under the Proposed Action, the properties would: Continue to be sustainably managed for production of forest products; conserve important fish and wildlife habitat; maintain a diverse array of public recreational opportunity; and secure water supply for the City of Whitefish. Under the No Action Alternative, no immediate changes would be likely since the conservation easement was designed to maintain current sustainable management practices and public access. However, given the value of this land and demand for residential development, it is likely the property would ultimately be sold and developed, with subsequent impacts to wildlife, public access, and the water supply of Whitefish.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends the Commission approve the purchase of the Haskill Basin conservation easement in order to secure the water supply for the City of Whitefish and to maintain important wildlife habitats and public access.

### **Proposed Motion**

I move the Commission approve the purchase of the Haskill Basin conservation easement from F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber Company.